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ABSTRACT

What Motivational Educational Entertainment (MEE) has learned about popular urban youth culture and the "hip-hop generation" is updated and expanded, focusing on substance use and abuse, violence, and sexuality. Qualitative focus groups were used to obtain the opinions of former high school dropouts who were enrolled in General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programs, attendees at a rap concert, and inner city residents. The hip-hop generation remains difficult to categorize, with no real unifying force that allows use of a single strategy for influencing behaviors. Subgroups are differentiated by age, beliefs, and motivations. An important subgroup is young people involved in the drug subculture. Although many youth within this drug culture consider marijuana use as generally socially acceptable, as is use of alcohol, use of crack cocaine is not usually tolerated in friends. Violence remains interpersonal and one-on-one in nature, and the gun culture is generally recognized. The attitudes of urban teens toward sex and sexuality seem to be very much formed by peer pressure and the media. Awareness of sexually transmitted diseases is high, but explicit factual information about transmission and symptoms is lacking. Shifts of the boundaries and rules of the hip-hop culture are constant, and continual study is required to understand the trends in urban youth life. (SLD)

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MEE REPORT UPDATE 1993

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to update and expand on what MEE knows about popular urban youth culture and the "hip-hop generation." The material focuses on the impact and implications of urban youth culture on three major areas: *substance use and abuse; violence; and sexuality*. It summarizes the latest opinions from youth, revealing their unique world view as they deal face to face with these issues in their everyday lives. It also discusses the current trends in urban youth culture and how they play out in behaviors related to these three key issues.

Though today's urban teens are faced with unprecedented challenges, MEE remains confident in their ability not only to persevere but to overcome. Resiliency in the face of the often tough urban realities of the 90's may be their most precious resource. All of society must be prepared to help them bridge the communications gap, and to bring an end to our alienation and misunderstanding. We must be committed to supporting and creating new systems for communicating with urban youth, with "real," credible, and above all, effective messages.

Approach/Methodology

The methodology for gathering information for this report was the use of qualitative focus group interviews, which were taped by MEE for further review and analysis. Participants in these focus group sessions included former high school drop-outs who were enrolled in General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programs; attendees of an underground rap concert; and inner city residents gathered from local neighborhood.

The demographic profile of this study:

- males and females from the lower socioeconomic strata
- young adults between the ages of 17 and 20
- people of color, primarily African-American and Latino
- residents of inner city neighborhoods of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Although, the number of focus groups does not represent a comprehensive study and the results are not statistically reliable, they can be used for directional purposes and for an insider's perspective. They reflect similar findings by MEE and other research findings from studies of much larger sample sizes.

Overview

The hip-hop generation continues to be difficult to easily categorize, exhibiting several distinct and differing sub-cultures. Though their appreciation of rap music and their need to strike a stance, which is oppositional to mainstream society, still serve as a common bond among urban youth. Beyond that there is no real unifying force that allows the use of a single strategy for influencing behaviors. There is no magic bullet that addresses easily all segments of this population. Sub-groups remain differentiated by characteristics such as age, belief systems and motivations.

An important sub-group that needs to be addressed urgently includes young people involved in the drug subculture. By this we mean those youth who regularly consume drugs and alcohol for recreational and other purposes. Chief among recent trends is an increased use of marijuana. Interestingly, many youth within this drug culture view marijuana as "not a real drug." Its use is an accepted part of their social scene.

Within this group, however, are various contexts of drug use and abuse. Each context will require different strategies and tactics in order to lower, and ultimately to bring an end to,

the resultant anti-social and self-destructive behaviors.

Violence, in its myriad forms, also remains a reality in the daily lives of America's urban teens. Violence has always been a part of American society. In the 1990's, its presence has become more intense, and most significantly, more deadly. The combination of an increased availability of guns and the overwhelming exposure to violence in the mass media. The bolder "what-do-I-have-to-lose" attitudes of urban youth means that disagreements, which may have been settled in the past with a verbal put-down or even a fist fight, are now being resolved with more violent and frightening consequences. Although somewhat ineffective, it seems that each generation's lack of conflict resolution tactics have escalated the level of violence. And each generational cycle produces younger and younger perpetrators and victims of violence.

Sex and sexuality continue to be defining issues for urban teens. Sex is perceived as many things: a road to popularity, a means of power and control, and a viable form of entertainment. Many of the decisions being made by teens regarding sexual activity are heavily influenced by peer pressure, the idea that everyone else is doing it. Although urban teens show awareness of sexual health issues such as HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, many do not exhibit corresponding changes in their sexual behavior, such as using a condom. And far too many of them still believe "it's not going to happen to me."

Substance Use and Abuse

Substance use and abuse seem to be on the increase among urban teens. Today, marijuana is the illegal substance of choice and beer/malt liquor is the legal substance of choice for the hip-hop generation; marijuana use gives "insider" status to urban youth who are creating an oppositional/street culture and want to demonstrate their "belonging" by doing something

"risky." We found wide-ranging opinions about substance use, crack vs. marijuana, and marijuana use in general:

A. *Attitudes towards Substance Use:*

- *Non-Users.* Youth who **do not use** drugs and alcohol but **accept** their use among peers.
- *Users.* Smoking "weed" is socially acceptable among this group. These youth don't make a big deal about using it but have legitimized it and are more likely to feel that it should be legalized.
- *Extreme Users* promote marijuana use ("It's a part of who we are."). Some will wear their use like a badge of pride and consider it to be part of their image.

B. *Opinions about crack cocaine vs. marijuana:*

- *Marijuana* - "weed," "blunts" (marijuana rolled in cigar paper), "spliffs," "chronic," and "joint" -- is perceived as acceptable and its use is promoted both by those within the culture and by rap artists such as Dr. Dre, Redman, Brand Nubian, and Cypress Hill.
- On the other hand, **crack cocaine** is unacceptable. If you use it, you're out; its use is not even discussed. Being called a "piper" or "crackhead" is a supreme insult.
- Peers won't even try to talk a friend out of using crack; instead, they just write him or her off as a loss.
- Crack is generally used by an older segment of the population, ages 25 and up.
- Any addiction is viewed as **bad** - even with marijuana, i.e., "... if you can't wake up in the morning without a 'J'." However, most urban youth don't think marijuana can be addictive.

C. Marijuana is **Easily Accessible** from the streets, in school, and in some local neighborhood stores where it is sold to customers who know the right "code" word.

D. We found a strong link between *Marijuana and Malt Liquor*. There is even a catch phrase for it, "Give me a 40 and a Blunt." Forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor are heavily promoted, readily available and are very popular in urban areas.

Violence

For the most part, urban youth violence remains interpersonal and one-on-one in nature. Our focus groups found "Posses" (groups) but did not find a lot of gang related violence to be common unlike what some media stereotypes would have you believe. Through interviews with urban youth, MEE has identified several leading causes for violence:

Personal/Relational Violence - *Gaining and Maintaining Respect!*

A. Many urban youth feel that they must *save face* when confronted by another individual or group. Much of this is accompanied by macho posturing, which may lead to violence.

1. Triggers include a perceived invasion of one's personal space or a challenge to an individual's sexual identity or personal property. Often this interpersonal violence is usually over preventable arguments i.e., stepping on someone's shoes, or the "What are you looking at?" variety.

2. In some communities, violence is an accepted way of earning respect.

B. When *the Image of the Peer Group*

or family is at stake, some urban youth feel that they must resort to violence in order to maintain that image with which they so closely identify. When a perceived insult takes place from outside the group (i.e. peer group, family group, extended family, etc.), the motivation for action is often that an individual feels he or she

**Excerpted from the Annals of the
American Academy of Political and
Social Science, January 1989:**

"To an inner-city male youth, the peer group is paramount. It sets the standards for his conduct; he badly wants to live up to those standards, to look good in the eyes of his peers."

- Dr. Elijah Anderson, Sociology
Professor at the University of
Pennsylvania

must respond or that a member of the group feels they must respond. The feeling is "If you don't do it [seek revenge], then I'll do it." **Peer Pressure** forces youth to seek a violent resolution to confrontation in order to save face within the group, i.e., "You're a punk. if you don't do anything."

C. Potential violence as a ***Deterrent or Neutralizer***

1. Some urban youth carry guns not because they intend to commit a violent act, but as a deterrent, i.e., "If someone knows I'm packing, they won't mess with me."
2. Others carry guns for protection, and reason that they should be prepared to make a preemptive strike: "I'm going to get him before he gets me." Youth often argue that if a disagreement occurs with a friend, it may be settled with only a fist fight; but in a confrontation with a stranger, "I don't know what he's carrying."

Random Violence

- A. ***Violence for Recognition, Image or Power*** -- Many youth believe that they can raise their esteem within their peer group and community by acts of random violence. These "wild cannons" are deemed as "thrown-off"

(unpredictable, crazy, on the edge) and are given both respect and a wide berth on the streets.

- B. ***Jealousy/Greed*** -- Wanting what someone else has is another motivation for violence,

"What I see happening is younger people committing more violent acts," said Geoffrey P. Alpert, professor of criminal justice at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. "Where many young people used to start their criminal careers with minor and property crimes, we're seeing them become more violent very, very quickly."

- 1992 FBI Crime Study as reported in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 1993

whether the object of desire is someone's boyfriend/girlfriend, a leather jacket, or a pair of expensive sneakers.

- C. **Boredom/Entertainment** -- Without enough positive alternatives in their communities, some youth feel that there's nothing else to do, therefore, "let's roll on somebody."

The Gun Culture

In its focus group sessions, MEE not only sought answers to the causes of violence, but asked youth to describe the nature of the current gun culture and how it impacts their lives.

Some observations:

- People are more violent and have become bolder in their use of firearms: "In 1993, brothers ain't takin' it any more."
- The younger generation, while more accustomed to violence, has less awareness of the consequences of its actions. Death or prison as results of such behavior are not considered.
- Youth have a fatalistic attitude, feeling they have nothing to lose by resorting to a violent lifestyle.
- Youth are either "in the mix" (part of the gun culture) or out of it; there is no middle ground. The culture is not seen totally as a dead end, however. There are those who leave this way of life after having children or going to prison.
- Violence is *generational*, becoming a cycle in our communities. The younger generation learns it from older siblings and the surrounding community. In addition, each generation escalates the level of violence.
- Violence tends to occur within age groups, not across them. Approximate age group breakdown: 13-17, 18-24, 25-32.
- People under the influence of substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine are more likely to commit acts of violence.
- Drug-related trades and transaction are likely places for the occurrence of both random and interpersonal violence.
- Violence on television and in movies has had an effect on society. The question has now become whether in creating movies like *Menace II Society*, does the media validate negative, violent behavior, make it acceptable or actually promote it?

"A 1991 survey of inmates in state prisons found that more than two-fifths of those convicted of assault or murder had committed their crimes while under the influence of alcohol."

- Courtland Milloy, *Washington Post*, September 26, 1993

Sexuality

Urban teens' attitudes toward sex and sexuality seem to be very much formed by peer pressure and explicit or suggestive images in the media. Based on MEE's focus group sessions on this topic with youth 13-21 years old, MEE concluded that there is a great need for the dynamics of male/female relationships, while studied extensively among adults, to be explored further among this age group.

A. **The Role of Sex in the lives of urban teens:**

1. Sex is seen as an *enjoyable activity*; it serves as a viable form of entertainment and as an outlet. Some typical comments: "My friends have sex, some every night"; "It's just the feeling; some do it just to be doing it, some do it to brag"; "Relationships aren't a big goal, most are just after sex."
2. Initial sexual experiences seem to be occurring at *earlier and earlier ages*, i.e., "most kids start at age 12."
3. Youth are *naturally curious* about sex. The mixed messages from parents and society leads to a lack of information and to poor decisions regarding sex.
4. Many of the participants saw sex as an *escape mechanism* to get away from family and other problems or to get even with their parents.

B. **How Peer Pressure affects sex and sexuality:**

1. There is a very strong perception among urban teens that *their peers are having sex early*. Therefore, having sex at an early age is no longer taboo. Instead it is a source of pride for young men and of popularity for young women.

- Many are aware of young girls who are pregnant or already mothers. One teen said, "At the beginning of my senior year in high school, 83 girls were in the process of having babies."
 - One 14-year old female believes "90% of my school is having sex. One or two of my personal friends are having sex and all the boys are."
 - Another participant from the focus group "heard of someone starting as young as 7."
2. Urban youth often feel that they can't be comfortable among their *peers* unless they are having sex.
 3. Peer pressure plays a strong role in sexual decisions, particularly since sexual activity is equated with *popularity* by many youth.
 4. *Power* within the peer group is often equated with the number of sexual conquests, particularly among young men, i.e., the "notch on the gun belt" mentality.
 - "For men in particular, they think it's cool, they won't be the one having babies."
 - "Boys want to be noticed (they want to be insiders) so they brag about sex;... they don't want to feel like outcasts."

C. *Safe Sex Practices:*

1. While *awareness was high* of the existence of HIV and STD's, knowledge of factual information on transmission and symptoms was low. In addition, teens did not see themselves as a high-risk group for AIDS.
2. Most youth, especially females, were more concerned with *teen pregnancy* than STD's and HIV. Every youth knew of some teen pregnancies in their communities but few knew of any HIV positive people or people with AIDS.
3. Most of the youth interviewed said they don't think about the future, and don't set goals; therefore they do not consider the *consequences of sex*.

- "It's about making money, moving out of the projects, survival."
 - Most are concerned with violence, drugs, and trying to survive.
4. Many youth do not use *condoms*. Condoms are seen as counter to the moment. Complaints were that condoms: are not comfortable, or easy to use; can "mess up the moment"; and do not prevent AIDS. Most agreed, however, that they are inexpensive and accessible.
5. Most youth did not see *abstinence* as a realistic message strategy.
- "People don't care, don't listen, and think it won't happen to me'."
 - Some males had the attitude that "all she has to offer me is what's down below."

Conclusions

The young people seem to have a strong belief that what's going on now is different than the "way it was" even a few years ago. They are saying not only are they different than their parent's day, but that they are different than even than their older siblings day. That is, things today are so different no one not involved *really* knows what it's like out there. In fact, most of us can't even imagine (they believe). To impact these critical social issues, concerned society must understand their environment to reach youth.

Developing Positive Self-Images & Discipline in Black Children, 1984

"The peer group has risen in rank because other institutions don't take the time or have the interest or the ability to relate to young people."

- Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu

Today's urban educator or public-health official must face these challenges by using insightful techniques that effectively reach and influence youth, and *engage them to become productive participants in our society.*

Young people will have to play an important role in changing their outlook and behaviors. Our research points out the need for the recruitment of a corps of peer leaders who have received training in counseling, problem solving and conflict resolution. These peer leaders must be armed with the *facts*, not the fictions, of drug and alcohol abuse, violence, teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Only then will they be adequately prepared and fully empowered to reach into their communities, encourage dialogue, and inspire their peers to reach for a brighter tomorrow.

MEE is committed to remaining up-to-date and aware of the ever-changing boundaries and rules of the hip-hop culture. These shifts are constant -- what was hip three months ago could brand you as "wack" (out of style, corny, old) now. In order to track current trends, MEE will continue conducting focus group sessions in urban centers across the country, keeping its finger firmly on the pulse of young urban America.

A Matter of Degrees

Motivational Educational Entertainment has released an educational video targeted at inner city youth "at risk" of dropping out of school. The program entitled "A Matter of Degrees" uses rap artists, taped interviews and "rap" sessions featuring teens who have rebounded from personal and family problems or poor choices to return to school and regain control of their lives. This video is pro-educational and uses high profile rap artists including KRS One, Public Enemy and Black Sheep to encourage youngsters to stay in school or if they have dropped out, to return to school and graduate. A powerful and effective tool to reach inner city youth ambivalent about their education, the video captures a language and style that appeals to teenagers while relating to them. This twenty-three minute program was co-produced by Noble Films and MEE Productions. It's available for purchase 10/93 (\$95.00)



FROM: MEE to YOUTH

MEE is a West Philadelphia (Pennsylvania) communications company taking socially responsible entrepreneurship in a new direction. Nationally recognized for its contemporary research and expertise on urban youth, MEE is taking a novel approach to solving inner-city youth problems: telling adults to shut up and listen while asking teens "What's Up?"

A research, consulting and video production company, with a mission to understand, reach and positively affect urban youth, MEE is achieving its objective through cutting edge, primary research and creative media applications. Research and videos include:

- The MEE Report: "Reaching the Hip-Hop Generation" . . . 5/92 (\$25.00)
- MEE's Video Documentary
(1994 New York Festival Award) . . . 2/93 (\$60.00)
- The Final MEE Symposium Report . . . 5/93 (\$35.00)
- MEE Report Update on Violence, Substance Use & Abuse, and Sexuality
. . . 10/93 (\$25.00)

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